

GEARING UP FOR THE EMPEROR'S CHALLENGE

Charles Helm

Spring is coming, and it's time for runners and walkers to start thinking about northern BC's premier mountain-running event. The eleventh annual Emperor's Challenge Mountain Run will take place on Saturday August 8th, thirty-five kilometres south of Tumbler Ridge. Hosted by the Wolverine Nordic and Mountain Society, and billed as the toughest and most beautiful half marathon in the world, it has been attracting increasing numbers of athletes from across western Canada, and as far away as the USA and England. There was a record field of close on 400 in 2008.

After ten years on Roman Mountain, the course moves in 2009 to neighboring Babcock Mountain. The race in a sense became a victim of its own success, as increasing numbers made for a bottleneck in the scenic but technically challenging Matthews Gully.

It may seem hard to believe, but many say that the brand new Babcock course has even finer features than its predecessor. The distance is the same as before, and the hub of the race and start/finish area remain the same at the Core Lodge, but the route will have some very different features. It passes through entrancing rocky scenery, right over the mountain summit and through the valley that bisects the mountain-top, past alpine tarns, with glorious views of Roman Mountain and the northern Rockies on a fine day. The elevation gain of 2000 feet is not quite as formidable as on Roman Mountain, and the incline not as steep, but this translates into a constant uphill battle for the first sixty percent of the race, which fit runners may possibly be able to do without walking.

Kris Swanson had entrenched himself as Emperor of Roman Mountain, winning the first eight runs. In 2007, in a veritable Battle of the Titans, Canadian Marathon Champion Steve Osaduk nipped ahead of Swanson to win a nail-biting race, claiming the title in a new record time of 1:28:45. In 2008 Swanson reclaimed his title in a blistering race. Stephanie Mills of Victoria set the women's record in 2004, blazing the route in 1:48:12. Some say the new route may make a new record possible, others that most participants will experience slightly slower times.

Although the event is an ultra-tough race for these outstanding competitors, it is simply a challenge and a test of endurance for most ordinary mortals. The youngest participant for the full distance has been ten, and the oldest eighty-two. Twenty-eight adults and seven kids have received their coveted "in perpetuity" numbers for completing five Emperor's Challenges. Another 21 adults and 4 kids are eligible to receive this honour in 2009.

Runners or walkers have five hours in which to complete the event. Gold finisher's medals are presented to those finishing in under two hours, silver for those in under three hours, and bronze medals for the rest of the finishers. In 2009 for the first time there will be age-group awards as well: 18 and under, 19-34, 35-49, 50-64, 65 and over.

Kids are catered to through tough races of their own, of exactly one fifth or one tenth the adult distance (4 or 2 kms). A festive atmosphere prevails at the Core Lodge, which is the hub of the race, with a marquis, massages, refreshments, awards ceremony and much more. The event is spectator friendly, and telescopes are trained on the upper reaches of the mountain to see who emerges first.

There is nothing else quite like this... anywhere. Whether running, walking or watching, RISE TO THE CHALLENGE.... the Emperor's Challenge! For further information visit www.emperorschallenge.com



View looking up the famed "Matthews Gully", August 2008 Race